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# EVERYTHING STEMS FROM NOTHING

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EVERYTHING STEMS FROM NOTHING

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A Thesis  
Presented to  
the Graduate School of  
Clemson University

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In Partial Fulfillment  
of the Requirements for the Degree  
Master of Arts  
English

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by  
Daniel Richard Theis  
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## ABSTRACT

In sixteenth century Europe, mathematics was undergoing a transformation. Prominently among these changes were the switch from roman numerals to arabic numerals and the implementation of the number zero. The number zero has two main functions: to stand on its own as a symbol of nothing and to function as a placeholder. Thus, zero can be a symbol of nothing as well as a number that dramatically increases the value of the others. The dual roles of zero led to much confusion in early modern people.

Shakespeare uses the different roles of zero in his plays *Richard III*, *Hamlet*, and *King Lear* to illustrate women's paradoxical relation to power. Monarchal power is dependent upon having sons to pass the throne to. Thus, kings are dependent upon women for procreation. Similarly, young men who are in line for the throne are dependent upon their mothers to maintain their place in line. If a prince was born out of wedlock, then he stands to lose everything. Women have a surprising amount of power because the system depends on them to produce heirs. Conversely, women are also subjugated in a system of patriarchal inheritance. Women have virtually no say in political matters and have little rights to hold property. Early modern women in a patriarchal system fill both roles of being nothing: they simultaneously have no power on their own, while having the power to give value to others.

On the other hand, men have a purely negative experience when they become nothing. The men of the play are the ones that are endowed with value by

their mothers; therefore they are something, or anything but nothing. When a man becomes nothing, he loses all of his power. Furthermore, men do not have the reproductive capabilities of women, so they lack the ability to add to someone's value. When a man becomes nothing, he has less power than a woman because he does not have the ability to endow a child with value. Shakespeare uses the new language of mathematics to illustrate the relationship between gender, patriarchy and power.

## DEDICATION

This thesis is dedicated to my beloved Elizabeth who supported me even when my research materials took over the whole house.



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## Introduction: Everything Stems From Nothing

In sixteenth-century Europe, mathematics was undergoing tremendous change. Prominent among the new ideas was the switch from Roman to Arabic numerals and the advent of the number 0. These two alterations to the current math of the day not only changed the world of math, but western society as a whole.

In switching away from Roman numerals and gaining the number zero, mathematics became abstract. The adoption of Arabic Numerals meant that values were no longer represented by letters of the alphabet, but by foreign symbols. Using unfamiliar symbols changed the way people interpreted numbers. They were now “symbols of quantities devoid of qualities” (Crosby 121). In other words, numbers as symbols is a social construct. There is no intrinsic reason that “three” is represented with “3.” However, Arabic numerals did meet with some resistance from Europeans. The people of the day were familiar with the old system, and many of them were completely perplexed with where to put zero (Crosby 113).

Zero, with its two main functions: standing on its own as a symbol of nothing, and acting as a placeholder (i.e. 1,000), created confusion because in the Roman numeral system there was no zero, either on its own or as place holder (Jaffe 29). The implementation of zero forced people to recognize nothingness. This means that people were forced to recognize what was not there.

Zero is the number “that endows all others with value” (Jaffe 55). If zero is nothing, then non-zero numbers are by default something. And zero functioning as a placeholder alters the value of the other numerals (i.e. from 25 to

2,500). All of the somethings are defined in terms of their relationship to zero.

Zero, a symbol of nothing, becomes the origin of the other numbers.

Contemporary changes in mathematics also played a large role in shaping the mercantile system of the early-modern period. Most notably, “money markets develop that deal only in the exchange of currency, generally in the form of bills of credit; as these are essentially nothing (scraps of paper), this is a market of nothing” (Jaffe 70). If people are going to borrow money on credit, then they are going to be in debt. During the Renaissance, “debts owed to a creditor are described identically with the duty, *debito*, owed by a Christian to the Church” (Jaffe 72). “Nothing” not only influences the business world, but it also connects to seemingly distinct areas of life: business and religion.

The new awareness of nothing manifests itself throughout early modern culture including Shakespeare’s plays. The most notable example of mathematical implications of nothing in Shakespearean drama is in *King Lear*, and these same mathematical implications also appear in *Hamlet* and *Richard III*. All three of these plays are concerned not only with what is there, but what is not there. Additionally, the three plays feature similar social constructs that are heavily influenced by what is not present. In each play, there is at least one transfer of monarchical power, a patriarchal system of inheritance, gender relations, and the intersections of two or more of these constructs. Power is passed on through a patriarchal system of inheritance, but monarchical power is dependent on women to produce future kings. Power and inheritance depend on women to endow sons with value so the system can continue.

Additionally, Shakespeare implements the contemporary idea of women's genitalia and womb as nothing. The idea of nothing being tied to women's reproductive organs is used to illustrate the importance that reproduction and heterosexual sex play in monarchical power. If the system of patriarchal inheritance is to be used effectively to pass down power, women need to produce sons. Also, the woman is once again functioning as an origin, endowing her son with value, making him something.

The first common feature is the all-or-nothing aspect of monarchical power, as evidenced in the ways power is transferred in the plays. Claudius comes to power in *Hamlet* by killing his brother, Old Hamlet. Claudius gains all of the rights of the monarchy while simultaneously taking all of them away from his sibling. King Lear gives away everything but his title of King (Hattaway 112). He does this by dividing up his kingdom amongst his daughters. Lear's method of division is different from a traditional passing down of title and lands because he tries to divide everything three ways. The division of everything into pieces shapes the ill-fated transfer of power in *Lear*. King Richard kills several of his family members to gain the throne. Power is transferred from one king to another following the traditional line of succession, but Richard manipulates the system through violence to get what he desires. He creates multiple absences of kingship until he comes to power.

The changes in power intersect with the patriarchal system of inheritance as they are both dependent upon a son that has been endowed with value in order to continue. In *Hamlet*, the titular character is not in Denmark when his father is

killed, when Claudius takes the throne, or when Claudius marries Gertrude.

Hamlet's absence at the second two events is crucial. Hamlet has rights to the throne, but Claudius takes it. Also, Hamlet was not around to voice his displeasure at the mother's remarriage until after the fact. Hamlet as a character is not too concerned with the throne, but he is disturbed by his mother's marriage with Claudius and with honoring his father, who is also absent throughout the play except for the few scenes where his ghost is present. Hamlet spends the majority of the play "remembering" his father to protect his father's legacy as well as his own inheritance.

The patriarchal system of inheritance in *King Lear* is complicated because Lear does not have a son. So the king ends up dividing everything between Regan and Goneril while forcing Cordelia into exile. His last truly powerful act as king proves to be fatal. *Richard III* does not have any conspicuously absent figures in the system of inheritance, but Richard shows the fragility of the socially constructed system. In Act I Scene iii, Margaret laments that all of the violence taking place is interrupting the natural line of succession. Richard creates what is called a "vacuum of authority" to enable his access to the throne (*Estate* 61)

The constructs of succession and inheritance are also linked with gender relations. The link between the two is straightforward; the patriarchal system of inheritance requires a son. Inheritance follows the rule of primogeniture, which means that everything (land, wealth, title) is passed on to the oldest son. Kings need to marry and reproduce if they want their line to continue. Marriages, and attempts at them, are seen in all three plays. In *Hamlet* there is the marriage

between Claudius and Gertrude. In *Lear* there are the marriages of all three of Lear's daughters, and in *Richard III* there are the titular character's relationships with Anne and Elizabeth. Potentially powerful men in these plays become dependent on women to consolidate their power (Oestreich-Hart 246).

Additionally, a young male's inheritance is dependent on his legitimacy, as he cannot have been conceived out of wedlock and receive his birthright. Richard once again shows the fragility of the system by starting rumors about his nephew Edward being illegitimate; in *Lear* the King questions the legitimacy of his own daughters. Also, this construct gives women power. A man's inheritance is based on his mother's sexuality. All it takes is one word from his mother for a young male to lose everything (Hall 163). The previous sentence illustrates the great paradox of the patriarchal system: a system that is designed to keep women subjugated actually gives them some power over men due to human reproduction. Kings are dependent on women to produce sons and the sons are dependent on their mother's chastity to keep their inheritance. This construct is also subject to nature because a couple has no control over the sex of their child.

Mothers function as the origin of power because they endow everyone with their place in the power structure in the play. Just as the points on a graph are defined in terms of their relationship to the origin, so do mothers define characters in the plays. For instance, Gertrude's celibacy and social station place Hamlet as next in line to the throne in *Hamlet*. On the other hand, Laertes is not in line for the throne because he is not a direct descendent of the king. In *Richard III*, the reader sees three origin points. The first is Margaret, the mother of

Edward and Richard. Second, the Duchess appears in the play as an origin that has already been passed by. At the end of the play, Elizabeth is the new origin. She is going to marry Richmond and start creating a new line of succession. *Lear* does not have an origin figure, as the king's wife is not present during the play. Inheritance is complicated by the fact that Lear did not have any sons which leads to a situation where the younger generation's place in the power structure is fluid. Once Lear divides power between Regan and Goneril, they act as his origin by reducing his power. The combination of no origin figure and no son to pass everything down to leads to a situation that has no chance of being resolved peaceably.

Current scholarship backs up many of my points and observations about a focus on power, gender, and marriage. However, current scholarship does not appear to realize how all of these central themes in the plays are influenced by what is *not* there. Thinking in terms of what is not present ties back into changes occurring in mathematics (namely the number zero) during the time immediately preceding and at the same time Shakespeare is writing his plays.

Paula Blank has established the connection between Shakespeare and mathematics. She writes that Shakespeare understands the mathematical concept of "place" (121). Therefore, he comprehends the idea of zero being able to endow other numbers with value by acting as a placeholder. Blank continues on to suggest that, "for Shakespeare, the value of a man, cannot be known by studying a single figure; . . . there is a distinction between a 'figure' – a number in isolation – and the value of that figure, which is dependent upon its 'place' " (122). In



other words, Shakespeare understands that people's "value" is set in relation to other people. In my study, I am looking at the ways in which men in line to inherit monarchical power are endowed with value by their mothers.

Occupying the place of "nothing" is a paradoxical situation for a woman and a disadvantageous one for a man. For a woman, being an origin is a position of limited power in a patriarchal world. Two generations of men are dependent on them to maintain their positions in the power structure. Her husband needs at least one son to continue the line of inheritance and any sons that she has need her to be faithful to her husband so that they are legitimate heirs. However, the women are still usually kept out of the line of inheritance, and thus they also represent "nothing" in the sense of not having material wealth or monarchical power. For the men in the play, being "nothing" is the worst situation. Kings and princes, the ones being endowed with value, need to be something in order to still be in power or in line to receive it. Once a man becomes nothing, he has been cut out of the power structure. A man typically loses this place in one of two ways. First, he is killed by another character. Usually the murder is committed by a character who is far down the line of succession and is looking to improve his spot in line. Second, his mother can take some sort of action that cuts him out of the line of succession. In either case, the system of patriarchal inheritance, a system that is dependent on women for reproduction, is the cause of a man losing his place.

The thesis includes a chapter for each of the plays. Chapter one analyzes *Richard III*. Richard is a decorated general, and his excellence in the field gives

him a respected position in society. However, Richard is not happy with merely being an instrument of the king's power. He has no hopes of promotion if he lets nature take its course. There is no way for him to gain more power unless he becomes king. This leads Richard to commit many heinous acts to get what he wants. Richard creates a "vacuum of authority" to work his way to the throne. He needs to eliminate two generations of potential monarchs, his own and his nephew's, to seize the crown. In this case, the patriarchal system of inheritance leads to violence. Richard, if he wants the crown, has no other options because of the place he is given in the line of succession by his birth. Interestingly, the line of succession in *Richard III* has three origins, two old and one new. Queen Margaret and the Duchess are the old origins and Elizabeth is the new one. The Duchess is the mother of both Edward IV and Richard III. In act IV scene 1, she refers to her womb as "the bed of death" (IV.1.52), which shows that she recognizes her role as the origin of the bloodshed. Young Elizabeth takes over the role as origin when she marries Richmond. Her oldest son, if they were to have one, would be born into the top of the line of succession based solely on Elizabeth's actions. The kingdom is in a more stable position with Richmond as King than when Richard had the throne. Richard is able to get the throne, but because of his dependence on women, he is vulnerable and is eventually defeated.

Chapter two focuses on *Hamlet* and begins with an analysis of the transfer of monarchical power from Old Hamlet to Claudius. Claudius needs to create an absence so he can gain the throne. Additionally I analyze act III scene 4 where Gertrude refers to her dead husband as "nothing" (III.4.133). This passage serves

to illustrate the all-or-nothing nature of the monarchy and demonstrates that male nothingness is more complete than female nothingness. The ghost has lost his power because he was murdered, so now he is nothing in the eyes of Gertrude. Next, the chapter discusses the patriarchal system of inheritance in the play and specifically looks at Hamlet, who is not around when his dad is killed and when Claudius takes the throne. Additionally, Claudius does not have any sons to pass his throne onto. This leads to his marrying Gertrude so he can continue his lineage. The marriage of Claudius and Gertrude ties in directly with gender relations and mothers functioning as the origin. The marriage leads to Hamlet being cut off from his inheritance and from the throne. If Claudius and Gertrude produce a son, Hamlet is cut off from those two things permanently. Through much of the play, Hamlet “remembers” his father and demonstrates knowledge of the mathematical implications of nothing. Hamlet’s diligence at remembering his father leads to his success at preventing Claudius and Gertrude from producing a son. However, in act V Hamlet makes an error in assessing the implications of nothing, leading to his demise and eliminating his father’s contributions to the power structure completely.

The last chapter discusses *King Lear*. This play is shaped by Lear’s wanting to transfer goods and duties, and having three daughters to pass them onto. Shakespeare sets up *Lear* so that the King endows his daughters with value through division, which is the opposite of how a queen endows sons with value by acting as a placeholder (increasing through multiples of ten). Typically, the queen functions as a placeholder for her son, increasing his value through multiplication.

In *Lear*, the King tries to increase value through the opposite means of division. Also present in *Lear* is the conspicuous absence of an origin figure in Lear's generation. Lear's wife is not a typical origin figure because she did not give birth to any sons. The absence of an origin figure causes instability in the power structure because the next in line for the throne is a woman, Goneril, Lear's oldest daughter. The issue of a woman rising to the throne was a familiar one to Shakespeare's audience. In the late 16<sup>th</sup> century, Queens Mary and Elizabeth held the throne, but both of their ascensions were contentious. John Dudley challenged Mary's ascension (Plowden 127) and Elizabeth needed her late sister's word of approval to secure the throne (Plowden 153). Women were allowed to hold the throne, but their ascendancy was more contentious than that of the typical man. Women's positions in the line of succession were more malleable than a man's. The play suggests that a woman's ascension to the throne should not be interfered with as Lear's interference leads to the destruction of his family.

In the play, Lear alters his daughters' roles through division, and it leads to chaos. Lear tries to step in and endow his daughters with value. He does this through a game that is rigged from the start to give Cordelia the largest piece of the kingdom. However, his plan backfires when Cordelia refuses to play along. Cordelia's disobedience leads to Lear's passing everything on to Regan and Goneril, who then take whatever measures are necessary to protect their new power. The characters in this play blur gender lines due to the roles they are forced into. Lear takes on the role of origin by endowing his daughters with value. His two oldest daughters take on masculine traits as they strive to protect

their power. At the same time, Lear turns his daughters into his mothers by giving them power. They fill the role of origin in Lear's life by reducing his power, indicating a generational reversal. Lear's failure to recognize that things really do come from nothing leads to his interference with his daughters' inheritance. Lear's division of everything undoes the line of inheritance (set up by the placeholder abilities of his wife) and catalyzes the rest of the play that ends in tragedy for his family.

In *Hamlet* and *Richard III*, there is at least the possibility of a smooth transition of power because of the presence of female origin figures that define other people's relationship to monarchical power. In *Lear* there is no such figure. The King goes against the traditional line of inheritance, leaving everyone undefined and leading to chaos. However, just because there is a chance for a peaceful transition does not mean that one will occur. Men who want the throne do whatever they can to reduce their rivals to nothing, usually using violence or calling a rival's legitimacy into question. Lear mistakenly reduces himself to nothing by giving away everything he has but the title. Claudius kills his brother, and Richard III uses violence and claims of legitimacy to gain the throne. Once a King is reduced to nothing in these plays, it is an irreversible situation; unless, of course, the new King is reduced to nothing himself. For an early modern man, being nothing is a completely negative situation because he does not have the reproductive capabilities to function as a placeholder.

Advances in mathematics during the 16<sup>th</sup> century give Shakespeare a new way to frame issues concerning power and gender. Queens are not functioning

differently than they did before, but their paradoxical relation to power is being represented with mathematical language and concepts. Men do not relate differently to their mothers and wives in these plays than they did before, but their position of being simultaneously more powerful than women while also being dependent on them has a new form of expression. By using the language of mathematics, Shakespeare shows the unavoidability of men's dependence on women. If a patriarchal system is going to be used, then the system is going to be dependent on women to act as placeholders in spite of the fact that the system is designed to keep women from power. Shakespeare, through the new (to the western world) idea of zero is able to shed light onto relations that define the most powerful people of his time: kings.

## Chapter One: Origin Figures Link Past and Future in *Richard III*

The women in *Richard III* are frequently associated with “nothing” and absences. The womb and female genitalia are called “nothing” at key points of the play in reference to reproduction and heterosexual sex, respectively. By making these references, Shakespeare is illustrating early modern views on reproduction. In early-modern society the womb was known as a “matrix” which was understood to be an empty space or nothingness (Jaffe 4). The term matrix also refers to a method of reproduction through which an impression of a figure “is transferred to another material” through “an empty form with only an outline, an 0-like machine . . .” (Jaffe 4). Applied to the womb this term infers that the womb is a form of “nothing” that is used for reproduction.

By establishing these two crucial aspects of patriarchal society, reproduction and heterosexual sex, in terms of “nothing,” Shakespeare places women in a role similar to the one that zero holds in mathematics. Women, on their own, hold no power in a patriarchal society, just as the number zero on its own denotes “nothing.” However, when a woman marries and bears sons, her actions endow her male offspring with value, exactly as zero gives other numbers value when it is used as a placeholder.

Thus, women become an origin for power and gain an important role in a patriarchal society. The patriarchal system is dependent on sons to inherit goods and power. Additionally, dependence on male heirs means Kings are dependent

on their wives to be able to keep the throne in their family. In the same vein, young men are dependent on their mother's fidelity so they can receive their inheritance. If the King conceives a son out of wedlock, that young man will have no rights of inheritance. So males are dependent on women for their place in patriarchal society as children and again as grown men.

This dependence on women gives the connection between sex, reproduction, and "nothing" a different connotation. In the plays men are trying to devalue sex while emphasizing that women have no power in society. Men's reinforcement of women as "nothing" also shows that men have to do this because they do not want to be ruled by the people who they subordinate. However, there is nothing that men can do about the situation. The perpetuation of the patriarchal system is dependent on women, the very people the system subjugates, to survive.

In *Richard III*, the role of origin changes in a linear fashion parallel to the passing of time. The origin keeps moving forward from one woman to another just as time keeps passing in the same way. The origin should not backtrack in order to keep the kingdom moving forward. In the action of the play, when the role of origin is passed down, the old origin is still alive. The woman who is the origin, or placeholder, is typically knocked out of that role due to the death of her husband and son(s). These male figures dying off eliminate any contributions she has made to the line of succession as well as precluding her from bearing any more sons. This situation leaves the woman without her title and much of her influence. On the other hand, men lose their title as King or Prince only through death. Naturally, the women mourn their lost loved ones, keeping them in touch



with the past. The men who killed the loved ones try to move forward and forget the deceased, so the women end up being more cognizant of the departed than the men.

Richard creates a power vacuum in the play so he can gain access to the throne (*Estate* 61). By doing so he shifts the role of origin back on to his mother, the Duchess of York. Once he gains the throne, he tries to rectify his past deeds by attempting to woo Elizabeth. Richard's actions lead to only temporary success. The old origins never forget the past, their memories enable them to catalyze Richard's defeat and help the country move on.

*Richard III* shows four origin points that have three different relationships with monarchical power. Margaret and the Duchess of York are former origin points that have been passed by. Margaret is passed by due to artificial circumstances when her husband is usurped and her son, Edward, is killed. Edward's widow, Anne, is no longer next in line to be an origin after her husband's death. Margaret relinquishes the role of origin to the Duchess of York. The Duchess passes the role of origin on to her daughter-in-law Elizabeth who married her oldest son, Edward IV. The transition from the Duchess to Elizabeth is a smoother one as the origin point goes from the mother of the current king to her daughter-in-law. The transition has two parts: First, the Duchess' husband dies. Second, Elizabeth bears legitimate sons with Edward IV. The transition is not complete until both conditions are met. The order of the two, however, is inconsequential. The point is that these transitions all leave behind an old origin who is still alive and mourning the past. The play gives the reader different types

of transitions, natural and unnatural, both of which center on the ideas of nothing and absence.

At the start of *Richard III*, Elizabeth functions as the origin point. She is the faithful wife of the current king Edward IV, and they have two sons. Since the children are male and legitimate, they are next in line for the throne, displacing Clarence and Richard. Edward IV's brothers were the immediate successors before he married and had male children. Once Edward's sons are born, the line of succession no longer goes directly through Clarence and Richard; it goes through Edward's children first. Richard gets moved even further down the line when Clarence has a son. Richard's nephews have moved him far down the line of succession.

Richard is shuffled down the line of succession by an act of "nothing." In act I scene i, Richard tells Brakebury, ". . . I tell thee, fellow,/ He that doth naught with her (excepting one)/ Were best to do it secretly alone" (I.i.98-100). He is referring to having sex with Edward IV's mistress, Jane Shore. Also, Richard uses "naught" in line 99 to mean both sexual intercourse and evil while simultaneously making a play-on-words with "nought" from line 97 (uttered by Brakebury), which means "nothing" (Holland 9). In this one short passage Richard aligns the evils of sexual intercourse with "nothing." Richard associates sex with evil for two reasons. First, Richard is not successful at producing any children and he can pass the blame for this on to women by referring to sex with them as evil. Richard in his opening soliloquy states, "And therefore, since I cannot prove a lover," (I.i.28) illustrating that he has not had success with women.

Second, his brothers doing “nothing” with their wives and producing sons disempower Richard.

If Richard wants the throne, he has to eliminate the people ahead of him. The path is clear for Richard to start this process once Edward IV dies. Edward’s death leaves his oldest son, Prince Edward, as the heir to the throne. Since Clarence is dead too, only Richard is left to guide the child king, leaving the Prince in a precarious position. England has a weak king, which leaves what Coppelia Kahn refers to as “a vacuum of authority” (*Estate* 61). This “vacuum,” or absence of authority, allows Richard to create absences in the line of succession so he can move up. This vacuum shows the inability of women to actually protect their offspring. Women’s inability to protect their children is demonstrates their role as nothing in society. They can endow their sons with power, but if the husband dies, they do not have enough power on their own to protect them.

Characters in the play realize the importance of absence to their situations. Heather Dubrow writes that *Richard III* “is concerned with the presence of those who are not present and the absence of those who should be” (161). Elizabeth realizes the situation her family is in when she tells Rivers and Grey that the loss of Edward IV “includes all harms” (I.iii.8). She realizes that she cannot protect her sons and that the only uncle left is Richard, whom she does not trust. Elizabeth’s marital fidelity placed Prince Edward first in line for the crown, but once her husband is gone she does not have the power to protect him. This is

another way that women signify absence because even though she is present as a parent, on her own she does not have any means of protecting her oldest son.

Prince Edward also notices that people are missing when he arrives in London. He tells Richard, “I want more uncles to welcome me” (III.i.6). The young prince’s observation points to his biggest problem. The only uncle present is not going to look out for his best interests. The vacuum of authority, coupled with Richard’s unfettered access to the Prince, leads to Richard being able to do away with young Edward and his brother.

Once Richard obtains the throne, the origin shifts back to the Duchess of York. Since Richard does not have any sons, the origin reverts to the Duchess’ line instead of moving forward to his wife, Anne. The Duchess is re-established as the origin, as she was before the start of the play. York, and her womb, is once again the origin of the current power structure.

The Duchess recognizes her role as placeholder for Richard. In Act IV Scene i, she exclaims, “O my accursed womb, the bed of death!” (53). The “O” at the beginning of the line is the same shape as the number zero. There are many instances of a line starting with “O” in the play that do not correspond with zero, but this conspicuously well-placed one helps to emphasize the nothingness of the womb. Additionally she calls her womb the birthplace of death. Therefore, Richard’s deeds can be traced back to a point of origin associated with nothingness.

Richard views her role in his life differently, but with the same result. In his opening soliloquy, Richard states that he is “rudely stamped,” referring to his

hunchback (I.i.16). The editor writes in the footnote that rudely stamped means, “coarsely shaped (as in minting a coin)” (Holland 5), which is a form of matrix production (Jaffe 4). When Richard was born, an error in production caused him to come out deformed. His mother’s womb is the source of his deformity, and Richard states that his deformity is the source of his actions. Thus, Richard and the Duchess’ views on her womb end up in the same place: with her womb, her nothingness, being the origin of Richard’s actions and villainous nature.

Given her role as maternal origin, the Duchess grants Richard enough proximity to monarchical power that he can influence it. After Edward IV has sons, Richard is no longer in a direct line for the throne; but he is close enough to the king and his family that he can create the power vacuum. Richard is able to trick Edward IV into ordering Clarence’s execution, and after Edward dies, Richard has free access to Prince Edward and young Richard.

Richard tries to manipulate the past by charging that his own brother, Edward IV, is a bastard. He makes this accusation using the language of nothing. He explains to Buckingham that his father “found that the issue was not his begot,/ Which well appeared in his lineaments,/ Being nothing like the noble Duke my father” (III.v.90-2). Richard charges that his brother has none of the genetic material of his father. Richard then tells Buckingham to be careful how he spreads the lie because the Duchess is still alive. Maurice Hunt goes on to argue that “for all practical purposes, Richard’s and Buckingham’s use of bastardy charges places the crown within Richard’s grasp” (130).

Another interesting aspect of the charges of illegitimacy leveled by Richard is that he points to his mother as the unfaithful woman. Richard could have charged that Elizabeth bore illegitimate children and still eliminated his nephews from the line of succession. This construct shows that Richard sees his mother as the origin of the power structure. Leveling charges against his mother also emphasizes, ironically, another form of power that women have; they can make their sons bastards. By labeling his brother as a bastard, Richard forces Elizabeth to give up whatever power she has left from being queen because her husband's kingship was not legitimate. Richard does not simply remove his nephews from the line; he tries to portray Elizabeth's role as illegitimate, erasing her contribution to patriarchal power completely. Richard is able to use the language of "nothing" to manipulate the past and help clear his way to the throne.

Richard is aware that his mother is still alive and able to spread the truth about Edward's legitimacy. Through arranging with Tyrrel the murder of his nephews, Richard demonstrates a lack of confidence that his charges will be sufficient to keep them from the kingship (Hunt 131). Richard is able to effect change and gain the throne through the use of these charges, but he knows that his claim to the throne is tenuous because his accusations are false. Earlier in the same scene, Act IV Scene ii, the reader hears from a newly crowned Richard for the first time. He sits on the throne and speaks to Buckingham, "Thus high, by thy advice/ And thy assistance is King Rickard seated./ But shall we wear these glories for a day?/ Or shall they last, and we rejoice in them?" (IV.ii.3-6). Richard, in his first appearance as king, is already questioning the permanence of

his reign. His main concern is that the people will find out “That Edward still should live ‘true noble prince’ ” (IV.ii.16) thus negating his claim to the throne. Unlike the women’s connection with the past, Richard’s falsification of history creates only a temporary path to the throne. He has to have his nephews killed to help solidify his kingship.

The villain shifts the origin backwards to his mother so he can gain the throne and then tries to move forward so he can start stabilizing his kingdom. If Richard does not have sons, his line will be finished. Richard recognizes the importance of having offspring to help establish and maintain his power, as evidenced in two wooing scenes, where the language of “nothing” appears. In both instances, Richard is trying to use present actions to correct the wrongs of the past. Richard tries to woo one woman that he widowed, and another whose sons he had murdered.

The first wooing scene is in Act I Scene ii between Richard and Anne. This scene is prefaced by Richard acknowledging he is going to woo Anne “ . . . not all so much for love/ As for another secret close intent” (I.i.157-8). The titular character knows he is making a power play by marrying her. His biggest hurdle to overcome with Anne is that he killed her father and husband. These deaths cost Anne the opportunity to serve as an origin figure. Naturally, Anne does not think kindly of Richard, but he is able to succeed by “shifting power and praise, responsibility and blame to” Anne (Oestreich-Hart 249). He tells her that her beauty is responsible for his killing. Oestreich-Hart continues by saying Anne does believe him because she relents (251). Richard is able to get her forgiveness

for his previous deeds. After Richard woos her, he exclaims, “And yet to win her, all the world to nothing!” (I.ii.237). Here Richard refers to having zero chance to win her. However, he also realizes that he needs to succeed if he has any chance at being a stable king (Oestreich-Hart 257). Additionally, Richard knows that he needs to reproduce, or do “nothing” with Anne to create a sense of stability.

The second wooing scene is Richard attempting to persuade Elizabeth to let him marry her daughter, also named Elizabeth. Like Anne, Elizabeth opposes Richard. He killed her sons, which ended her reign as origin figure. Richard tries to gain her favor by telling her, “The loss you have is but a son being king,/ And by that loss your daughter is made queen” (IV.iv.307-8). Richard tries to convince her that by letting him marry young Elizabeth all of her losses would be recouped. However, this is not the case. If Prince Edward had lived, Elizabeth would have had the ear of the king. Since they had a loving relationship, she would have maintained considerable sway over affairs in England for many more years until he married and had a son. On the other hand, if she lets young Elizabeth marry Richard, she would not have nearly as much influence. Richard does not love Elizabeth (she acknowledges as much in I.iii.13), and he does not love her daughter. Elizabeth would have the respect of her daughter, but because Richard does not care at all for either Elizabeth, he would ignore them and do as he pleases. When Richard kills Edward V, he not only takes away the King’s power, he also robs Elizabeth of much of hers.

In the same vein, Richard also mentions to Elizabeth that he will bury her children in her daughter’s womb (IV.iv.423). His statement plays on previously



established notions of nothingness in two different ways, the first being the idea of sex as “nothing,” the second being the womb as “nothing.” In other words, Richard wants to commit the “evil” act of sexual intercourse so young Elizabeth’s “nothing” can produce a son and legitimize his reign. Young Elizabeth’s womb can become the origin of healing in the kingdom. Richard promises future children, created through “nothing,” to rectify his past transgressions.

While Richard is somewhat successful in moving on with Anne, getting her to accept the blame for his actions, Elizabeth does not let him get away. Richard tries to create “political amnesia” by wanting to bury the dead in marriage and procreation (Goodland 45). Anne shows that she implicitly believes him by marrying him; but she does not bear him any sons. However, the old origin, Elizabeth, completely prevents him from moving on. Instead she uses what little power she has left over the country’s affairs by helping her daughter choose a husband. At the end of the play, the country is moving on with young Elizabeth in position to function as the new origin, but with Richmond as husband instead of Richard. Elizabeth’s actions influence the future course of history because she did not let Richard trick her into forgetting the past, that which might appear as “nothing.”

Elizabeth, along with the other former origins in the play, does not let others forget the past. The Duchess blurs the distinction between dead and alive, and present and not present, by referring to herself as “a living ghost” (IV.iv.26). The duchess, in this role, becomes emblematic of the presence of nothing. By labeling herself as such, the Duchess connects herself with Margaret as a woman

who is waiting to die. Elizabeth also joins them by lamenting her own sorrows (Goodland 57). These connections lead to “the only uninterrupted burial rite in the entire First Tetralogy” (Goodland 58). Goodland then goes on to argue that this ritual is responsible for conjuring the ghosts that haunt Richard (Goodland 58), placing the displaced origins as the keepers of the past and of the supernatural.

These usurped origin figures, who view themselves as not entirely present, are able to affect the future by spanning a supernatural gap with the past. All three of the former queens’ roles as living ghosts positions them as connecting the past with the present. They are still alive or in the present, but they are also reminders of the past and the sole retainers of memories of the past in the play. These women bridge the gap between past and present. With all of the men gone, except for Richard and his followers, the women are the only ones mourning Richard’s victims. By not forgetting the past and people that are no longer present, they are able to create a lasting change.

Richard’s actions have created many absences, and he shows a “will to forget the dead” (Goodland 45). Elizabeth, the Duchess, and Margaret, do not let him forget, and in the end, he cannot escape. In Act V Scene iii, Richard’s inability to break away from his past deeds manifests itself, as ghosts of many of the people Richard wronged on his way to the throne reappear and haunt him in his sleep. Richard needs to win the battle with Richmond’s army to maintain his throne, but his past helps prevent him from winning. The ghosts launch a two-pronged attack. First, they interrupt Richard in his sleep, and second they visit

Richmond in his sleep and give him confidence. Try as he might, Richard cannot maintain the position that he attained through causing so much harm to others. In this instance, what is not present eliminates Richard from the power structure completely.

The women also use the past to influence the future by creating a situation that allows the marriage between young Elizabeth and Richmond, where they get to pick their successor as origin. Typically, the Queen does not get to choose who succeeds her. In this case, the union is possible for two reasons. The first is that Queen Elizabeth thwarted Richard's advances by remembering the past. The second is that Elizabeth, Margaret, and the Duchess have their lamentation period of remembrance that conjures up the ghosts that haunt Richard and help lead to his defeat. Without these actions, the wedding would not have been possible. The women, by using their position as one-time origin figures, are able to end the war and unite the Yorks and Lancasters. In his speech that concludes the play, Richmond talks about he and his new wife creating a peaceful and united England. Once again, the language of "nothing" appears. Richmond says, "O, now let Richmond and Elizabeth,/ The true succeeders of each royal house,/ By God's fair ordinance conjoin together" (V.v.29-31). Shakespeare places another "O" in a spot that denotes the mention of an origin. This time the "O" is for young Elizabeth who, because of the work of the origins before her, is in position to be the origin, but she is not there yet. He then goes on to say, "And let their heirs – God, if they be so -- / Enrich the time to come with smooth-faced peace,/ With smiling plenty, and fair prosperous days" (V.v.32-4). In these lines, he is

pointing to the necessity of having heirs to perpetuate the peace that has been reached. The old origins helped create the conditions that led to peace; now it is up to young Elizabeth to step into the role of origin to make it last.

## Chapter Two: Madness, Legacy, Remembrance and Revenge in *Hamlet*

“Nothing” functions in a mathematical sense as well as a literal sense in *Hamlet*. Shakespeare implements “nothing” in a mathematical sense by referring to the early modern conception of the womb as “nothing,” which in turn allows the woman function like the number zero. Gertrude exhibits the power to add value and de-value her son and late husband by her actions. She can ruin Old Hamlet’s legacy by having a son with Claudius, which would eliminate Hamlet’s inheritance and likely succession to the throne. If Claudius and Gertrude have a son, Old Hamlet and Hamlet would be reduced to nothing. Old Hamlet would have no legacy, and Hamlet would lose his inheritance and chance to be King.

Additionally, in *Hamlet* “nothing” functions in a non-mathematical sense. There are instances in the play where nothing is used in a context that is not relevant to math. However, at two crucial points in the play characters should have used the mathematical version but did not. The characters who interpret different uses of nothing correctly, either in a mathematical or non-mathematical sense, are the ones who succeed in the play. On the occasions where nothing is used incorrectly, the results are disastrous.

Shakespeare’s *Hamlet* features Gertrude as the origin point of the entire play with Ophelia standing in as her likely successor. Ophelia never gets the opportunity to be the origin because Gertrude keeps herself firmly entrenched in her role by marrying Claudius. This marriage has ripple effects throughout the play. First, it legitimizes Claudius as king (Sardone 98). Second, it sets up a

likely scenario that Hamlet will not be king, as well as deprive him of his inheritance (Burton 78). Lastly, it starts a chain reaction of events that ultimately leads to the death of the major players. These events often feature the language of “nothing,” relating the themes of madness, legacy and remembrance back to Gertrude and her actions. Gertrude’s remarriage threatens to eliminate Old Hamlet’s legacy by removing him from the power structure entirely. Hamlet, in order to prevent this, focuses on not letting others forget about his father. Unfortunately, Hamlet’s emphasis on the past is ill-fated as it leads to his neglecting Ophelia, sabotaging any chance he has at a stable future.

Directly preceding the start of action in the play, Gertrude is married to Old Hamlet, King of Denmark. Gertrude’s faithfulness to her husband ensures that Hamlet is legitimate and that he is heir to his father’s fortune. In addition, even though Denmark’s monarchy was elective (Barnet 132), Burton points out that Hamlet is still considered next in line for the throne (103). He possesses his position because of his proximity to the throne granted to him by his mother’s actions.

Hamlet’s absence when his father is murdered opens the door for Claudius to take the throne that most assumed would go to Hamlet. Also, Old Hamlet’s death creates the opportunity for Claudius to marry Gertrude, solidifying his reign and allowing her to remain as Queen and potential origin. So, instead of having the origin point move forward to another woman, Gertrude stays where she is, which raises issues. Most notably, this peculiar situation, in which the younger brother of the deceased marries his brother’s widow, acts to delay Hamlet’s

ascension to the throne. Before he sees his father's ghost, Hamlet is upset with his mother because she remarried quickly to her brother in-law. He compares his mother to "a beast that wants discourse of reason" (I.ii.150), and he refers to their wedding bed as "incestuous" (i.ii.157), which emphasizes that the wedding was illegal according to canon law (Barnet 15). His mother and stepfather know that he is upset, and they ask him to stop mourning his father. But, if the memory of Old Hamlet were eliminated, Claudius and Gertrude's wedding bed would no longer be incestuous because Gertrude's first husband would no longer be remembered. Children born in an incestuous relationship would have serious issues with legitimacy when it comes time for a potential heir to inherit his father's fortune and crown.

The potential fallout from the Queen's re-marriage shows that Gertrude has the power to endow men with value, and to take it away. The Queen endows Hamlet with power by being faithful to Old Hamlet, placing her son next in line for the throne. By the start of the play, Hamlet is passed over by his uncle Claudius. Claudius jumping over Hamlet tarnishes Old Hamlet's legacy while ignoring Hamlet's legitimate claim to the throne. Hamlet is Old Hamlet's only real chance to have a legacy. However, if Claudius and Gertrude fail to produce a son, Hamlet's disinheritance is most likely temporary. If Claudius has an heir, that opportunity disappears. As Burton writes, "[f]or Hamlet, the birth of an heir to Claudius and Gertrude would . . . effectively make his disinheritance permanent" (103). He continues, "[m]oreover, a male heir in particular would certainly supplant Hamlet in the eyes of Claudius and probably the court at large

as” next in line for the throne (103). For Hamlet to avoid this fate, he needs to keep his father’s memory alive. Hamlet maintaining his position as next in line for the throne keeps Old Hamlet from becoming completely “nothing.”

Hamlet begins to consider taking action against Claudius after he meets with the ghost of his father. At the end of their meeting the ghost concludes, “Adieu, adieu, adieu. Remember me” (I.v.91). Hamlet swears to do so. R.A. Foakes makes the distinction that Hamlet swears only to remember the ghost (85). He is trying to separate the act of remembering from exacting revenge. By looking at the language of “nothing” in the play, it appears that revenge and remembrance are actually one in the same, even if Hamlet does not realize it himself. If Hamlet can stop Claudius and Gertrude from having a son, Old Hamlet’s legacy will live on. Gertrude would not have been able to give any of Claudius’s sons a place in line for the throne.

In Act I Scene v, the ghost explicitly contradicts the instructions that Hamlet receives from the king and queen in Act I Scene ii. After describing his murder to Hamlet, the ghost commands him to remember. Hamlet then replies, “ ‘Adieu, adieu, remember me.’ I have sworn’t” (I.v.110-1). The first clue that revenge and remembrance are the same also occurs during this scene. The line where the ghost first tells Hamlet about the murder also doubles as a command for Hamlet to exact revenge. The ghost tells Hamlet, “Revenge [the ghost’s] foul and most unnatural murder” (I.v.25). So the ghost, during the course of his conversation with the hero, uses his commands of “revenge” and “remember” interchangeably. Hamlet swears to remember and the reader knows that the ghost



is still listening because it gives commands to the others later in the scene. If the ghost were not satisfied with Hamlet's promise, he would have spoken up then just as he speaks to Marcellus and Horatio later.

The language of "nothing" illustrates Hamlet and Gertrude's differing views of the ghost. Their outlook on the ghost is different because Hamlet can see the ghost while Gertrude cannot. Hamlet refers to his father's ghost as "a thing immortal" (I.iv.67) while he is contemplating whether or not to follow the ghost. On the other hand, Gertrude refers to the ghost as "nothing at all" (133) during Act III Scene iv, just after Hamlet talks to the ghost. In this instance, she refers to the fact that she cannot see the ghost. Further, she mentions that she hears "nothing but ourselves" (134) referring to only herself and Hamlet. Hamlet, because he is focusing on the past, is able to interact with his father's ghost, while Gertrude, who is holding steadfast to the future, is unable. By remembering his father, Hamlet is keeping Old Hamlet in the power structure. Gertrude, through not being able to see or hear the ghost, illustrates that her actions will eliminate her husband's contribution to the line of monarchical power completely. After she refers to her husband's ghost as "nothing" multiple times, he leaves the room. Now that he is dead, he is "nothing."

Act III Scene iv also illustrates how being "nothing" is different for men and women. For women, being referred to as "nothing" is reflective of their power as origin figures. They do not have monarchical power, but they can empower men. For men such as Old Hamlet, being "nothing" means that they have no power. Being defined by women, men need to be anything other than

“nothing” to show that they have power. When a man becomes “nothing,” it shows that he has lost everything; he has been reduced to zero. Men lack the reproductive properties of women to endow children with power and function as a placeholder; they have nothing in a more absolute, nihilistic sense.

As Act IV Scene iii continues, Hamlet implores his mother not to sleep with Claudius. This is telling because the ghost’s first words to Hamlet are a reiteration of its command, “Do not forget. This visitation/ Is but to whet thy almost blunted purpose” (111-2). Trying to heed his father’s command, Hamlet tells his mother, “Good night – but go not to my uncle’s bed. Assume a virtue, if you have it not” (159-60). Charged with the responsibility of keeping his father’s memory alive, Hamlet tries to accomplish his task in this scene two different ways. First, he tries to re-establish communication between Gertrude and the ghost, but she cannot see or hear it. Second, he bids her to stop sleeping with Claudius. Failing to create direct communication between his mother and the ghost, Hamlet goes for the next best thing, keeping his father in the power structure by stopping Gertrude from bearing Claudius an heir. He is able to keep his father from being reduced to “nothing.”

While Hamlet is trying to protect his father’s and his own legacy, he feigns madness so he can hide his true intentions from others. Hamlet is often feigning madness toward Rosencrantz and Guildenstern who Claudius and Gertrude ask to spy on Hamlet. Because of his friends’ interaction with him, he is wise to pretend if he does not want others to know his true plans. In Act IV Scene ii, there is a crucial passage where Hamlet uses the rhetoric of “nothing” to

accomplish this end. Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are trying to find out where Hamlet has stored Polonius' corpse. Rosencrantz pleads with Hamlet, "My lord, you must tell us where the body is and go with us to the King" (25-26). Hamlet replies, "The body is with the King, but the King is not with the body. The King is a thing - . . . Of nothing" (27-8, 30). As the editor points out in a footnote, this is often viewed as "an allusion to a contemporary theory of kingship . . . the Body Natural and the Body Politic" (Barnet 97). However, this passage is also layered with meaning crucial to the play's discourse of "nothing." Hamlet's assertion points to Gertrude as an origin figure. Stating that the King is a thing of "nothing" shows that the King relies on "nothing" (i.e. the origin) to actually become something, in this case the King. It also illustrates that young men are dependent on their mother's fidelity to be in a position to one day become King. Moreover, the statement points to the differing views of the ghost. Hamlet views his father's ghost as a thing while his mother views it as "nothing." The passage also demonstrates that Old Hamlet is still dependent on Gertrude, even after death, to be something.

In a similar vein, Hamlet, just before the play within a play in Act III, refers to Ophelia's genitalia as "nothing," hinting at her role as a child bearer and her possible future role as an origin. He makes a bawdy pun using the word "country," to which she replies, "I think nothing, my lord" (III.ii.120). Hamlet then counters with, "That's a fair thought to lie between maids' legs" (III.ii.121-2). When she asks what is lying between her legs, he replies, "Nothing" (III.ii.124). This exchange is crucial on three levels. First, Shakespeare is

aligning Ophelia's genitalia with "nothing," which is common for the time and aligns her reproductive capabilities with a potential role as origin. Second, having this exchange take place before the play within a play reminds the audience that Hamlet is not actually insane, he is only acting. Third, Hamlet's use of the phrase "country matters" earlier in the dialogue connects matters of state to "nothing." If Hamlet were to become King, he would need Ophelia's "nothing" to create stability in the country by producing sons. Also, the phrase points out that the country is dependent on women to produce future Kings. These few lines connect Hamlet's feigned madness, produced because of his obsession with the past, to Ophelia's potential role as origin, which is something that would happen in the future.

Hamlet's infatuation with his father's legacy also leads to his killing of Polonius, which in turn engenders Ophelia's madness. R.A. Foakes describes the scene of the murder; "Polonius is dismissed and then forgotten for 120 lines" (94). Foakes illustrates that Hamlet is so overwhelmingly concerned about his mother's sexuality, and protecting his father's legacy that he essentially brushes off killing a person. Gertrude's actions lead to Hamlet's obsessive behavior, which causes Hamlet to kill without thinking, which in turn leads to Ophelia's demise.

Hamlet's all-consuming obsession with the past ultimately sabotages his future. Hamlet is widely viewed as being next in line for the throne, a position endowed to him by his mother, and Ophelia is the most likely person to be his Queen. Hamlet, while he is trying to throw the King and Queen a red herring by feigning madness, essentially ruins his relationship with Ophelia. The first time

anyone in the drama hears of Hamlet actually acting like he is mad is after an off-stage encounter with Ophelia in Act II Scene i.

Hamlet's obsession with preserving his father's legacy leads to his neglect of Ophelia and helps to bring on her demise. R.L. Kessler argues that Ophelia dies by neglect and not by a direct act of aggression against her (124). Essentially Hamlet's reactions to his mother's actions cause Ophelia to be forgotten. The only times she is remembered are the few occasions where she is used as Polonius and Claudius' pawn. Consequently, Hamlet's obsession with the past and feigned madness end up causing Ophelia to go insane. After becoming mad, Ophelia drowns in Act IV. Whether or not her death is a suicide is debatable, but either way Hamlet loses his only real chance at having a wife.

Ophelia's madness is viewed in terms of great significance to the court in Denmark. Elizabeth Klett writes that Ophelia's "madness presents a very real threat to the royal court, as stated clearly in Act 4 Scene 5; 'she may strew/ Dangerous conjectures in ill-breeding minds' (14-15)" (132). Klett is arguing that Ophelia's madness, brought on by the death of her father, could possibly lead her brother Laertes to resort to physical violence against the King. If the King is killed, then Gertrude is in danger of losing her role as origin. Gertrude will be displaced at some point, but Ophelia's madness could hasten the process. Harmonie Loberg furthers Ophelia's threat to the Queen by suggesting that "Ophelia's presence poses a threat to all of the Queen's roles" (67). She points out the threat to the throne, as well as that of potentially displacing Gertrude from

her role of mother (67). Ophelia's presence and madness are threats to displace Gertrude as origin.

Hamlet's feigned madness and Ophelia's real madness are both discussed in terms of "nothing." Polonius, noting Hamlet's mad façade, states, "Your noble son is mad./ Mad I call it, for, to define true madness,/ What is't but to be nothing else but mad?" (II.ii.92-4). Polonius' description of Hamlet gives little credence to the seriousness of the situation. He equates madness with simply being mad. He dismisses Hamlet's state of mind as being "nothing else but mad," which adds nothing new into the discussion. He uses the literal definition of "nothing," trying to gain favor in the eyes of Claudius and Gertrude by telling them that Hamlet's situation is only a minor problem. By using the non-mathematical definition, Polonius demonstrates a misunderstanding of the cause of Hamlet's feigned madness. Gertrude brings on Hamlet's madness by potentially devaluing him through her actions. Through her powers as an origin figure, the Queen (a.k.a. "nothing") is the source of Hamlet's feigned madness. Her actions have the potential to reduce Hamlet and his father to "nothing." Polonius's misreading of "nothing" fails to recognize the eventual cause of both his and his daughter's deaths.

Then Laertes, seeing Ophelia's madness posits, "This nothing's more than matter" (IV.v.173). Laertes defines his sister's madness as nothing, but he also recognizes that her "nothing" is something important. He shows a better understanding of this situation by acknowledging her madness as something. However, he still uses the literal definition instead of the mathematical one so he

never figures out the true root of the madness. A mathematical interpretation would point to Gertrude's role as "nothing" as the source as the catalyst for the events that brought on Ophelia's madness. As it turns out, this scene is the last time Ophelia is seen alive on stage. Her madness, induced by Hamlet's madness, which is in turn spawned from Gertrude's actions as origin figure, lead to Ophelia's death.

As the play unfolds, Hamlet's position in the power structure makes him a threat to Claudius, especially after the King learns that Hamlet knows about the murder of Old Hamlet. Claudius knows that he cannot kill Hamlet himself because Gertrude would get upset, and since he needs her to produce sons it is a risk he does not take. Instead, he sends his stepson over to England to be executed. This way Hamlet will become "nothing," like his father, while Claudius does not anger Gertrude. The surprise for Claudius is when Hamlet foils the plan and returns to Denmark.

Claudius, after reading Hamlet's letter, tries to figure out if it is true and asks, "Or is it abuse, and no such thing?" (IV.vii.50). The King is asking if the letter is forged. By using "no such thing" at the end of his query, the King asks not only if his attempt to get rid of Hamlet was successful, but also if Hamlet has been reduced to "nothing." Claudius was successful earlier in the play at reducing Old Hamlet to nothing in the eyes of everyone but Hamlet, Horatio, and Marcellus. If he is successful in this endeavor, he not only turns Hamlet into "nothing," but also assures that the ghost will also be reduced to "nothing" in everyone's eyes. By eliminating Hamlet, Claudius would be able to permanently

erase Old Hamlet's contribution to the power structure while preserving a semblance of stability with Gertrude as the origin point.

Upon his return, Hamlet sets his sights on exacting physical revenge on Claudius, which would allow Hamlet to gain the throne and inherit his father's fortune. This shift in his strategy is actually announced before he is sent to England. Hamlet exclaims, "O, from this time forth,/ my thoughts be bloody, or be nothing worth!" (IV.iv.65-6). Here, Hamlet uses "nothing" to endow his future actions with value. It also shows that Hamlet does not feel satisfied with his previous efforts in remembering his father. Hamlet feels that his efforts have been minimal when viewed in contrast to other young men who are honoring their deceased relatives in the play.

Revenge for a son is also tied to legitimacy. Laertes reaction to Polonius' death illustrates this point when he states, "That drop of blood that's calm proclaims me bastard,/ Cries cuckold to my father, brands the harlot/ Even here between the chaste unsmirched brow/ Of my true mother" (IV.v.117-20). Laertes claims that his father's murder has turned him into a bastard, which is not legally true. He furthers his point by saying his father is a "cuckold," which implies that this act makes his "true mother" not so true after all. Laertes equates his father's murder with his mother's being unfaithful. Coppelia Kahn writes that Laertes is "defend[ing] his father's honor" in this passage (*Estate* 140). Laertes is in an analogous situation to Hamlet: the death of his father starts to call into question his legitimacy. Hamlet has more of a claim to being de-legitimated than Laertes



because his mother has remarried, which could lead to his being illegitimated in effect, but not legally. Laertes is in no such predicament.

Hamlet has also been trying to honor his father, but he has done so up until this point through trying to control his mother's sexuality and forcing her to remember his father. His plans have been effective. Gertrude is not pregnant so Hamlet has not lost his inheritance and his father's legacy is still intact. By listening to the ghost's command to "remember," Hamlet has succeeded in preserving his father's legacy. In the end, however, Hamlet goes from preserving his father's legacy to suffering a similar fate.

Hamlet's demise is foretold because he misreads the "nothing" that surrounds him. Laertes challenges Hamlet to a fencing match in Act. V. Hamlet tells Orsio and Horatio that if he loses in fencing he "will gain nothing but [his] shame and the odd hits" (V.ii.178-9). The hero fails to understand that if he loses (gets hit) there will be dire consequences, not the trivialized ones he lists. He fails to realize that a trap is set, and if he loses the match, he loses everything. Hamlet will become "nothing" in a mathematical sense if he loses. Hamlet's misread of "nothing" is similar to Polonius's misreading of Hamlet's madness earlier in the play. Both characters make the mistake of using the literal sense of "nothing," and both characters die for it. They fail to realize the effect of their situations.

Hamlet does not realize that the fencing match can affect his value. Hamlet has been working throughout the whole play to keep Claudius and Gertrude from having a son, preserving his father's legacy while preventing himself from being turned into "nothing." Claudius and Laertes are trying to kill

Hamlet, which will permanently disassociate him from his inheritance and the throne; his death has the same effect on his value as Claudius and Gertrude having a son. Male “nothingness” is equated with death. Old Hamlet’s command to his son serves to keep Hamlet from turning into a living ghost.

Hamlet has been able to avoid being reduced to “nothing” by using correct interpretations of “nothing” as a mathematical construct. The hero recognizes his mother’s role as origin and the implications that her actions have on his value and on his father’s legacy. Hamlet demonstrates and applies knowledge of the mathematical meaning of “nothing” throughout the first four Acts of the play. Hamlet’s application of this knowledge of “nothing” allow him to control his mother’s sexuality so he can maintain his position as next in line for the throne. Once Hamlet makes a mistake, he loses everything including all that his father wanted to pass on to him.

### Chapter Three: Division and Disorder in *King Lear*

*King Lear* features the most explicit use of the word “nothing.” These uses, along with the idea of absence, frame the play. The drama starts with Lear getting ready to retire and preparing to pass on his possessions to his children. However, Lear only has daughters to pass his belongings to. According to Janet Adelman, not having sons “disrupt[s] the transmission of property from father to son” (108). By not having any sons in the play, Shakespeare sets up a construction familiar to his audience. The throne is going to be passed on to a woman just as it was to Queens Mary and Elizabeth. Lear’s progeny are organized into a set order for inheritance, but because the next in line for the throne is a woman, the situation is more fluid than if a man is next. Lear eschews the traditional method of distributing his goods and power and turns it into a game between his three daughters. The King’s division of his possessions attempts to undo the place holding qualities that his wife possessed.

With this game Lear is tries to endow his daughters with value, in this case material and immaterial power, as an origin figure usually does. Once the daughters obtain all of their father’s possessions and power, they turn the tables and try to endow him with value. Regan and Goneril de-value Lear by the standards he established. They take away his entourage and render him powerless. For Lear losing his power and becoming “nothing” means he has absolutely no sway over his kingdom. Women as “nothing” still have reproductive powers, giving them some influence. As a man, however, Lear does

not have the same reproductive capabilities; if he becomes nothing he will have no influence whatsoever. Furthermore, the generational roles are reversed as the daughters change the value of their father instead of the mother altering her son's. Whoever is able to alter the others' value (Lear or his daughters) is able to control the course of events in the play.

By dividing up his kingdom in this way, Lear gives mathematical underpinnings to the chaos that follows. He is trying to give everything but his title to his daughters. Traditionally, in a patriarchal system, primogeniture is followed and all possessions, power and/or title go to the oldest. Lear goes against these ideas in two ways. First, he tries to divide everything in three instead of just giving all he has to Goneril, his oldest daughter. Second, he tries to give the biggest portion of his material and immaterial goods to his youngest daughter, Cordelia, thus undoing his wife's role as placeholder. Lear is allowed to divide and give away everything he has, but the division has disastrous consequences.

At the beginning of the play, Lear makes preparations to distribute all of his worldly possessions while retaining the title of King. He has the game rigged, however, to favor his favorite daughter, Cordelia, who is simultaneously committing herself to a husband. By making his daughters swear their love to him, Lear is trying "to satisfy his desire for control even as he relinquishes political power" (Alfar 177). His plan works when his first two daughters respond. Both Regan and Goneril give him what he wants; they use exaggerated language, even pledging all of their love to him. Cordelia, on the other hand,

subverts his power by refusing to play along, using the word “nothing” to do so. Lear, trying to continue the competition between his daughters, asks Cordelia, “what can you say to draw/ A third more opulent than your sisters’? Speak” (I.i.82-3). Cordelia replies, “Nothing, my lord” (I.i.84). Lear’s youngest and favorite daughter unintentionally ruins his game by speaking the truth. Her reply to his goading has disastrous effects for Lear as it causes him to give up his plan of seeking care in “her kind nursery” (I.i.120) and in turn split everything between Regan and Goneril.

Lear replies to his daughter’s disobedience with the fateful line, “Nothing will come of nothing” (I.i.87), demonstrating a lack of understanding for the mathematical implications of “nothing.” His confusion of “nothing” is typical of early modern people (Crosby 113). He does not understand that the role he is playing is typically filled by a woman and that the role his daughters are going to fill will give them great power. Lear is making himself dependent on his daughters, much like a child. His actions at the end of the scene blur gender lines and create a reversal in generations.

Throughout this scene Lear arbitrarily endows his daughters with value, in this case material goods and power, instead of following a patriarchal system of inheritance. He already knows that he wants to give the biggest portion of the kingdom to his youngest daughter. Cordelia’s position as the youngest female makes her the opposite of the oldest male who traditionally inherits the most. Additionally, Regan and Goneril are only now receiving their dowries even though they are already married. Lear’s delay in handing down dowries suggests

that the dowry has been a cloud hanging over Lear's two oldest daughters for a while. Also, by having the game take place in front of Cordelia's suitors, Burgundy and France, they see what portion of the kingdom they stand to inherit if they win her hand. If Cordelia plays along with the game, her future husband would have seen her swear to love Lear above everyone else, including himself. Lear then would not only have controlled his daughters; he would have established a position of favorite in the relationships Cordelia has with her husband and father.

Lear not only endows his daughters with material goods, he tries to give them a fixed place in the monarchy (Alfar 175). The King is able to attempt this plan because the position in the line of inheritance of daughters is more malleable than that of sons. He plans on giving a greater portion of power, in addition to the material items, to Cordelia, which is rational because she truly does love him. His plan to rely on Cordelia to care for him is logical, and if she has more power than her sisters, she would have been able to protect him. However, he makes an error in having his plan depend on the outcome of a game. After his plan falls apart, Lear splits everything between Goneril and Regan while eliminating Cordelia's share completely. Lear's ad hoc division of power, forced by a lack of sons and a faulty plan, proves to be his undoing.

Regan and Goneril, after obtaining power from their father, reverse generational roles and start to reduce his value. A notable example of their endowing him with material worth is when they trim down his entourage in Act II Scene iv. During the course of the scene Lear is negotiating with his daughters as

to how many attendants he should have. He starts with wanting one hundred knights, and his daughter Regan wants him to cut it in half. Lear then tries to ignore what she said, but Regan holds him to it. Next, the King appeals to Goneril, who then rebuffs him. Following this exchange, Regan then tells her father that he can only bring twenty-five knights with him. Every time Lear appeals having his entourage reduced, Regan shrinks it in half. Lear announces that he will go with Goneril with fifty attendants because she loves him twice as much, using a similar appeal to filial love as he does in Act I Scene i. However, Goneril does not play along with his request this time, and ends up cutting off his train altogether. Lear's attempt to recreate competition for his approval between his daughters fails, and he does not get what he wants. Structurally, this scene follows a similar pattern to Act I Scene i. By refusing to give into his daughters' requests that he accept a smaller number for his train, Lear ends up losing everything. Lear losing his train is analogous to Cordelia's losing all of her inheritance by refusing to play along with her father's wishes. During both scenes, the person endowing is in an untraditional role. In the first scene, Lear is takes on the role of the mother, and in the second, children endow their parent with value. In both instances, the person being endowed with value is uncooperative with the person/people in charge and ends up with "nothing."

Lear's attempt to stay under his daughters' roofs and his reliance on them for his material worth illustrates a switch in generational roles. Claire McEachern reinforces this point, "in giving away his land, Lear has made his daughters his mothers" (214). Regan and Goneril, in their role as endowers of value and power,

reduce Lear to “nothing.” The Fool predicts this situation earlier in the play. He tells Lear, “I have used it, nuncle, e’er since thou mad’st thy daughters thy mothers;” (I.iv.155-6). The Fool continues, “Thou wast a pretty fellow when thou hadst no need to care for her frowning; now thou art an O without a figure. I am better than art now; I am a fool, thou art nothing” (I.iv. 174-6). Lear’s Fool hits on many key issues in this scene. First, in line 174, he illustrates that Lear is now subject to the moods of his daughters. If they are upset with their father, they now have the power to take action against him, as they do by reducing his entourage. Next, the Fool shows that because Lear has given up power, he is reduced to “nothing” and has no value. Lear is reduced to “nothing” because he lacks reproductive capabilities and therefore cannot function as a placeholder, or endow anyone else with value. Women, while being referred to as “nothing,” still play a role by endowing sons with value. As a man Lear does not have the same reproductive capabilities and is therefore left as absolute “nothing.” Nuyts-Giornal points out that Lear’s “royal title without royal power has become meaningless, a mere façade” (63). The Fool, by understanding the nature of “nothing,” is able to predict what happens to Lear later in the play.

After being stifled by his daughters, King Lear tries to disown them and makes claims for their illegitimacy; in other words, he tries to eliminate them from the power structure. The first instance of disowning a daughter occurs shortly after Cordelia refuses to flatter him in the opening scene. He tells her, “Here I disclaim all my paternal care,/ Propinquity, and property of blood,” (I.i.110-1). He then concludes his tirade with, “As thou my sometime daughter”



(I.i.117). Lear has turned from wanting her to be his mother to refusing to be her parent any longer. Lear does not make any claim of Cordelia's illegitimacy; because he still has power over her, he does not need to. He is able to eliminate Cordelia's inheritance by simply exercising the power that he still has as her father.

When Lear tries to use similar tactics with his other daughters, he fails because he has already given up his power as King, even though he still has the title. Goneril suggests that Lear reduce his train in Act I Scene iv because his attendants are turning her court into "a riotous inn" (I.iv.226). Instead of trying to negotiate like he does later, Lear lashes out at her. He calls her a "[d]egenerate bastard" and continues to say "Yet have I left a daughter" (I.iv.236-7). In this instance Lear disowns Goneril (he has only one daughter left) and he calls her a bastard. As stated above, Lear ends up losing his train. Lear's attempts at revoking Goneril's power are futile. He has willingly relinquished the power of the kingship and since he has let his daughters become his mothers, he cannot claim their illegitimacy. A child cannot typically speak with enough authority to negate the legitimacy of a parent and this holds true in this instance. Now that Lear's daughters are his mothers, their relationship will operate in that manner. They fill the role of origin for Lear, and are the ones that have power over him. He can no longer question their legitimacy; but they as mother figures could call into question his. Lear is unable to enforce parental control over his daughters because he willingly made himself dependent.

Lear himself further demonstrates and acknowledges impotence by when he tells Goneril, “Life and Death! I am ashamed/ That thou hast power to shake my manhood thus” (I.iv.280-1). Here, Lear is conceding that his daughter holds power over him. The power that she has is not trivial; it is strong enough to shake his very manhood. Lear’s statement follows his earlier argument with Goneril over the people in his party. By losing the argument and then his manhood, the King becomes what Paula Blank calls an “unaccommodated man,” which she continues to describe as “ ‘no thing,’ a cipher and, crucially, a cipher without *place*” (143). She continues, “[in] the world of Renaissance England, a man who is a ‘cipher’ has no value; he is one thing, or no thing . . .” (144). Blank is arguing that Lear, now that he has become nothing, has lost his place in society, which I suggest means that since he does not have the reproductive power to endow others with value he becomes absolutely nothing. Referring to a cipher without place makes the connection that Lear is like the number zero on its own: he is “nothing,” and unable to function as a placeholder. Now that Lear has lost his power to control his daughters’ worth, he is merely standing on his own.

Once he realizes he has lost his power to control his daughters, Lear acts in a manner seen in the female characters in *Richard III*; he curses the people who have power. In the case of *King Lear*, the titular character curses his daughters because they are the ones that have the power he gave up. Lear’s curses also are similar to those in *RIII* in that they have to do with the womb and revenge. Lear places a curse on Goneril when he exclaims, “Into her womb convey sterility;/ Dry up in her the organs of increase,/ And from her derogate body never spring/ A

babe to honor her!” (I.iv.262-5). Lear does not want his daughter to have a child unless it is ill-tempered and “thankless,” as she supposedly is. He would prefer that his daughter did not have a child, but if she does he hopes that the young one is as horrible to her as she has been to him. Lear wants the potential child to inflict as much pain on Goneril as she has on him. Through his curses, Lear behaves in a similar manner to the displaced origin figures in *Richard III*, thus blurring gender lines.

Throughout the course of the play, Lear has important characteristics that are typically associated with females. He describes “his state of mind [as] *hysteria*, ‘the mother,’ ” which Kahn writes was, according to Early Modern thought, to be “caused by a wandering womb” (“Absent” 35, 33). Not only is Lear’s altered state feminine, it is tied into contemporary notions of the womb as “nothing.” Lear also refers to his emotions in feminine terms, for example, in Act II Scene iv, during which Lear represses the urge to cry. He then refers to tears as “women’s weapons,” showing that the feelings he has inside are “bringing out the woman in him” (“Absent” 45). Two major internal characteristics of Lear are deemed feminine: his state of mind and his emotional status.

Lear further demonstrates female characteristics by attempting to act as an origin in the opening scene. He is the one endowing his children with value and trying to secure their place within the monarchy. Later in the play, he curses people currently in power, demonstrating characteristics of female origins. Lear is forced into this role because he does not have any sons leaving the line of succession in an easily alterable state.

While Lear takes on parts of the role of origin and displays many female characteristics, his daughters exhibit many masculine traits starting shortly after he gives them power. The Fool tells Lear, “thou gav’st them the rod and putt’st down thine own breeches,” (I.iv.156-7) with the rod functioning both as a phallic symbol and a symbol of power. Lear gives up his power, and his rod, and gives it to Regan and Goneril. In a normative scenario, the King passes on his power and rod to his oldest son, who then is responsible for protecting his own power. In this play, Lear is left to pass his “rod” on to his daughters, who, in turn, try to protect it.

Regan and Goneril protect that power by using a method typically seen in men: violence. In this sense, they are merely exercising monarchical power in the same manner that their father did. Alfar writes, “Goneril and Regan’s deployment of power cannot be expected to emanate from naturalized configurations of feminine goodness if they are to reproduce the forms of monarchical power already in place prior to their acquisition of the throne” (174). In other words, Regan and Goneril act in a fashion consistent with the course of action that a young King would take after being crowned. They are just trying to go about business as usual. Alfar discusses what would happen if they did not act this way; “A performance of power consistent with naturalized conceptions of femininity would not contribute to the status quo but, in fact, would associate monarchical forms of power with weakness and instability believed to be natural to femininity” (174). Lear’s oldest daughters, recently given power, would not want to show weakness or instability that would undermine their power.

This gender shift is caused by Lear trying to act like an origin at the start of the play. If Lear and his wife had produced a son, Lear's daughters would not be the ones gaining power and then being forced to protect and perpetuate it. Also, Lear would not have had to improvise a way to pass on his power because a son would have been more likely to hold on to his position in the line of inheritance granted to him at birth. The scenario where Lear divides everything between his daughters illustrates a shortcoming of the patriarchal system: it is less likely to be followed when a woman stands to inherit everything. As it happens, Regan and Goneril take on a traditionally male role by inheriting monarchical power.

Lear connects his daughters' protection of power, and alteration of gender roles, to the discourse of "nothing" in Act III Scene iv. He tells Kent and Edgar, "Nothing could have subdued nature/ To such a lowness but his unkind daughters" (III.iv.66-7). The King's uses of "nothing" in this passage is in a literal sense when the mathematical connection is the one that is appropriate. Lear assumes that Edgar's daughters have put him in a sad situation and he assumes this because he feels that his daughters have done the same to him. By not using the mathematical definition, he shows that he does not recognize the mathematical underpinnings of his predicament. His daughters are "nothing;" he refers to them as something different. Lear also mentions that nature has been "subdued" or altered by the daughters. Lear implies that daughters wield enough power to alter nature, or to create things that are unnatural. Also, Lear uses "nothing" to tell Kent and Edgar that daughters are the only ones who have such

power. Lear realizes that his daughters have power, but he does not realize the mathematical idea of nothing that is behind it.

Lear furthers the connection of Regan and Goneril protecting their power to properties of zero by locating the source, or origin, of his madness. Lear is standing on the heath during a storm, and Kent is trying to get the King to go inside. Lear tells him, “Thou think’st ‘tis much that this contentious storm/ Invades us to the skin. So ‘tis to thee,/ But where the greater malady is fixed/ The lesser is scarce felt” (III.iv.6-9). He is explaining that a greater malady is located or “fixed” in his head, so that he barely notices the storm. He goes on to refer to his malady as a “tempest in [his] mind” (III.iv.12) and blames it all on “Filial ingratitude!” (III.iv.14). Lear’s malady is fixed in his mind. His daughters’ actions have given his madness a “fixed” or specifically determined spot. In his new role as his daughters’ child, Lear is endowed with madness.

The first instance of filial ingratitude in the play, of course, is connected directly with nothing through Cordelia’s reply to her father in the opening scene. Her moment of insubordination sets in motion the chain of events that lead directly to Regan and Goneril inheriting all of Lear’s belongings and power. After gaining power, Regan and Goneril do whatever it takes to protect it, inducing their father’s madness. Additionally, during their reign the kingdom goes into total disarray. Regan and Goneril have power, but their father still has the title of King. There is tremendous fighting within the kingdom and much instability in the power structure. The title of King and the person wielding monarchical power are split. Furthermore, there are two people in power, which

directly contradicts the idea of a *monarchy*, which is defined by the OED as  
“Senses relating to exclusive sovereignty or rule by a single sovereign”  
 (“Monarchy”).

Lear’s kingdom is in disarray, but Cordelia, who unknowingly catalyzes the action of the play, can help restore order. While Kent is in the stocks, he reads a letter that he receives from Cordelia as part of his soliloquy. He states,  
“Nothing almost sees miracles/ But misery. I know ‘tis (the letter) from Cordelia”  
(II.ii.156-7). Kent continues, now actually reading the letter, “ ‘and shall find time/ From this enormous state, seeking to give/ Losses their remedies’ ”  
(II.ii.159-61). In the first portion of this passage, Kent personifies the word “nothing,” saying that it *sees*, pointing to an understanding that “nothing” can have an active role and that “nothing’s” role is almost miraculous. Having the soliloquy occur while he is in the stocks indicates that his misery stems from “nothing” because Regan, whom Lear empowers, places him there. Thus, his personification of “nothing” as nearly miraculous while his situation shows that “nothing” can create misery is indicative that women can be the source of pain and a source of relief. It also suggests that Cordelia is the one to relieve the state from these miseries. By saying “nothing” to her father, Cordelia sparks the problem, and she is also the one who can remedy the situation.

Cordelia returns to her father under the French flag, making her a threat to her sisters’ power by having the potential to re-endow her father with power. Cordelia is a threat for two reasons. One, she is with the French, and two, she could potentially restore Lear to health which would make him a threat to Goneril

and Regan. Cordelia shares the blame with her father for creating the situation that allowed her older sisters to gain power. By coming back to her father, Cordelia tries to create the relationship between them that her father wanted at the start of the play but that she cut off with “nothing.”

Cordelia after reuniting with her father “takes on both a parental and a filial role” (Young 57). She nurtures and takes care of him, which is in stark contrast to the treatment he receives from her sisters. Kathleen McLuskie writes that “their reunion becomes an emblem of possible harmony” (39). Cordelia is able to treat him better because she is not trying to protect her position of power like her sisters are. Young argues, illustrating a recent school of thought, that parents and especially fathers in the early modern period are known for being tender and loving towards their children (46-7). On the other hand, kings are known for dominating other people to reinforce and stabilize their power (46). Regan and Goneril act in the latter manner because they are protecting their power. In contrast Cordelia is able to act like the former because her situation as Queen is stable. Because she does not have anything to protect, she is able to take her father into “her kind nursery.”

Cordelia returns and re-establishes the relationship with her father, hoping to restore his health and to help fix the problems of the state; unfortunately for both of them, it is too late. Regan and Goneril are firmly entrenched in a position of power and cannot be defeated by force. Their situation is similar to Lear’s at the start of the play; the only way they will lose power in the immediate future is if they die or willingly give it up. Allowed access to power by the two sisters,



Edmund has Cordelia hanged. Then, Regan and Goneril kill each other in the final scene fighting over who gets to enlist Edmund's services. Albany restores Lear to power and just as he does so, Lear faints and dies. At the very end of the play, "the kingdom [is] in limbo with his heirs all dead" (Hadfield 578).

The last two acts of the play focus on trying to bring back what is lost during the game in the first scene (Hadfield 577). Lear tries to undo through division what his late wife did through acting as a placeholder. The King's game of division eschews the established system of inheritance by trying to give the biggest share of goods and power to the youngest child instead of giving everything to the oldest. Cordelia's simple three-word reply is enough to set in motion a chain of events that ends in tragedy. Lear's reply to his daughter, "Nothing will come of nothing" (I.i.87) demonstrates that he does not fully understand all of the ramifications of his actions. He does not understand that he is undoing the place holding function of his wife. Lear's confusion about the nature of "nothing" parallels early modern confusion over what to do with the number zero (Crosby 113). His actions lead to people playing gender and generational roles that they typically do not fill. He fills the typically female role of origin by endowing his daughters with value while his daughters take on the traditionally male role of monarchical power. Additionally, he becomes his daughters' son; they now have the power to endow him with value. Lear tries to give away his power so he can retire while his children take charge of the kingdom. Unfortunately, his confusion leads to complete disaster for his

kingdom. He and all of his children die, eliminating all traces of his contribution to the power structure.

The chain reaction of events that stem from Lear's undoing of the system of inheritance suggest that Shakespeare endorses having a woman on the throne. The playwright does not necessarily believe that the patriarchal system of inheritance is perfect, but he does think that if a system is in place then it needs to be followed. In this play, Lear creates a situation that ends tragically because he does not follow rules of inheritance simply because he does not have a son. If Lear would have let the next person in line have the throne, in this instance Goneril, there would have been a chance of having a peaceful transition of power. *King Lear* illustrates that the next in line, man or woman, should get the throne without objection in order to maintain the peace.

Conclusion: What does all of this “nothing” mean?

Shakespeare implements contemporary ideas of the number zero and its mathematical implications in *Richard III*, *Hamlet* and *King Lear* to show the relation between gender, inheritance and monarchical power. Young men inherit the throne due to the position they are endowed with by their mothers. Kings are also dependent on women to produce sons so there is someone to pass the throne to. In a patriarchal society, women are simultaneously powerful and powerless. By including references to women as “nothing,” Shakespeare shows that their relation to power is the same as the number zero’s relation to other numbers. The number zero has no value on its own, but it has the ability to endow other numbers with value. Women have no power on their own, but due to their reproductive capabilities they can endow others with power.

For the men in the plays, being “nothing” takes on a much darker meaning. Men, as the ones endowed with power by women, stand in as something. That is, they are anything other than zero because they have power. As long as men are still something, they are well off. However, once men become “nothing” they are completely powerless because they do not have the reproductive capabilities of a woman. In other words men lack the ability to endow other people with value. When men become “nothing” in the plays, they become absolutely “nothing,” as they have no power at all.

The titular character in *Richard III* understands the interrelations between gender, inheritance and power. Because of the spot in the line of

inheritance that he is endowed with by his mother, he is forced to create a vacuum of authority to obtain the throne. However, he is never able to solidify his power by marrying and having a son. The breaking point for Richard is when he is denied the chance to marry young Elizabeth and she goes with Richmond instead. Richard is able to become King by understanding how the relationship between gender and power works, but he is undone by his inability to solidify his power through having a son. Women, who are seemingly powerless, are able to take down a king.

Hamlet is able to successfully remember his father for the first four acts of the play by successfully interpreting “nothing” as a mathematical construct, but his attempt goes awry when he misinterprets nothing in Act V. Hamlet demonstrates knowledge of “nothing’s” relation to gender and power in two notable scenes. The first one occurs in act III scene ii. He is talking to Ophelia before the play within the play and refers to “country matters” to show the dependence of the monarchy on the reproductive capabilities of women. The second instance happens in act IV when he tells Rosencrantz and Guildenstern that the “King is a thing of nothing” to show a king’s relation back to his mother. However, in act V Hamlet fails to recognize the significance of his fencing match with Laertes and the effect it is going to have on his relationship to power. Hamlet uses “nothing” in a non-mathematical sense describing what he stands to lose in the match when in reality he becomes absolutely “nothing” because he dies. Hamlet ends up failing in his quest to remember his father by misreading the implications of “nothing.”

King Lear starts the play by dividing up his kingdom and power amongst his daughters. However, he makes a critical mistake by telling Cordelia that “Nothing will come from nothing” illustrating a total misunderstanding of the mathematical relationship between gender and power. Lear does not realize that he is undoing the line of inheritance established by his wife’s placeholder capabilities. He goes on to split everything he has, material goods and monarchical power, between his two oldest daughters, Regan and Goneril. Lear also makes a mistake by becoming dependent on his daughters. This situation reverses the generational relationship he has with them and turns his daughters into his mothers. Since they are now his mothers, they can alter his value as they see fit. Unfortunately for Lear, they reduce his troupe down to “nothing” and render him completely impotent. Furthermore, the transfer of power from Lear to his daughters blurs gender lines. Lear takes on roles traditionally seen in women such as endowing his daughters with value and by cursing the people in power. His daughters show masculine traits by using violence to protect their newly granted power. Cordelia comes back to help her father, but she is too late and her sisters are too powerful. At the end of the play Lear and all of his heirs are dead. Lear’s contribution to the power structure is completely eliminated due to the chain of events that stems from his misreading of “nothing” in the opening scene.

By using the language of nothing in these plays, Shakespeare aligns contemporary confusion over the nature of nothing with confusion over women’s paradoxical relationship to power. Male characters, no matter how they try to manipulate the system, cannot side-step the crucial role that women play, which

shows a direct correlation to contemporary changes in the meaning of numbers. Crosby points out, “[n]o politician, priest, general, saint, movie star, or maniac can make [pi] as little as 3 or as much as 4 . . .” (121). In other words the number pi, which is used in illustrating the relationship between the radius, circumference and area of circles cannot be changed by anyone. In a similar vein, zero and its relation to other numbers cannot be changed. This idea translates into the world of Shakespeare’s play through his portrayal of the patriarchal system of inheritance. As long as patriarchy is in place, no one can alter the relation that women have to power.

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